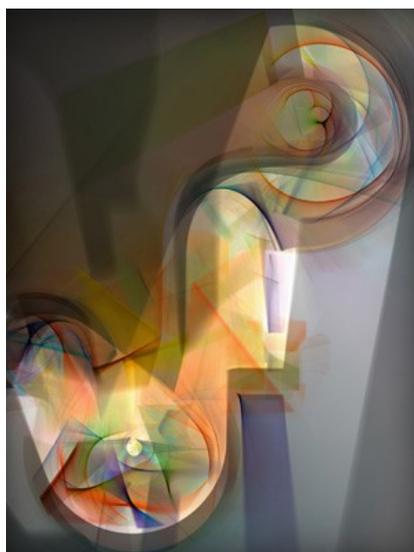


GAGOSIAN GALLERY



Thomas Ruff at Gagosian

Hunter Drohojowska-Philp



Thomas Ruff, "phg.05 III," 2013
C-print, 94 1/2 x 72 7/8 inches (240 x 185 cm.). Edition of 4.
© Thomas Ruff. Courtesy of the artist and Gagosian Gallery

As the practice of traditional photography itself fades like a print left too long in sunlight, artists who use photography look to its history for expression.

Thomas Ruff has developed a virtual way of creating a photogram, a process used by early modern photographers like Man Ray and Lázló Moholy-Nagy. Originally, it was a simple enough technique for making images without a camera, even used in novice photography classes, that involved placing an object on a piece of photographic paper and exposing it to light from an enlarger. When developed, the outlines of the objects are in white against the dark background like a paper negative.

At the Gagosian Gallery, through May 31, Ruff has created photograms with virtual objects casting virtual shadows or reflections, even in colors, onto virtual paper, which is then printed. The works in this show are in the range of four by six feet, and the best of them have an air of mystery and illusion despite their analytical origins. The pictures are titled for their file names. In

the soft gray tones one might associate with an early platinum print, r.phg.05_II translucent lenses tumble in space, their reflections, shadows and movement all executed virtually. Another work, phg.05_III, with sunny, coppery hues, recalls the paintings of Stanton MacDonald-Wright, a pioneer of American abstract painting. The colors, however, are made by the virtual object coated in virtual copper and hit with virtual light to make a virtual reflection. These implicit references to the history of modern art are entirely intentional. Ruff respects the photography of the past but recognizes the transitional state of the discipline.

Working with media designer Wenzel S. Spingler to help with the technical challenges, each image takes weeks of trial and error, even after Ruff began sending them to a supercomputer in Germany for processing. So it isn't that it is easier to compose in the virtual realm. It might be said that the challenges are similar to those faced in the earliest years of photography.

In the upstairs gallery, Ruff has reprinted historic photographs of a nude woman in classic poses. The albumin prints had turned brown with age and that color turned blue in the digital process so the detail of the images, printed on the scale of original glass plates, is enhanced. Ruff realizes that the photographic negative is a thing of the past but that there remains an inherent potency there that is not often appreciated and deserves investigation.

Ruff was a student of the Conceptual photographers Bernd and Hilla Becher at the Dusseldorf Art Academy in the early 80's. Among his peers are Andreas Gursky and Thomas Struth. All gained attention in 1990's for portraying mundane subjects on a monumental scale. Despite his technical prowess as a photographer, Ruff has been working with computer generated or enhanced imagery for at least a decade in series on internet pornography and images from outer space. In this series, however, he returns to his long-standing respect for the pioneers of photography, of modernism.

Technically, this may be a bit dizzying for those of us who recall the analog era but artists, above all, must show up for the inevitability of the present, however startling.

There will be plenty of photographers and others contemplating these issues this weekend at Paris Photo, the dynamic art fair returning to the Paramount Studios location in Hollywood. In addition, mostly traditional photography will be available at a wide range of prices in a live auction this Saturday at 4pm at Santa Monica Auctions.